Callie Friedman

Ms. Krafft

AML 2410, Section 8974

August 28, 2013

Response Paper 1, “The House of Mirth”

In “The House of Mirth” by Edith Wharton, Lily Bart represents a rare kind of woman for the time period in which she is living. At twenty-nine years old she is unmarried and living in a social class that she cannot keep up with. While she was mostly raised in the highest of standards with her mother and father, her father lost all of their wealth and soon tore their family apart during her later teen years. Because her father never spent much time at home, Lily’s mother took on the role of prominently instilling money-oriented values in her. After her parents’ deaths, Lily was left on her own to find the means to live the life her mother taught her. Due to her materialistic upbringing, Lily was trained to strive for high social ranking and the means to live in luxury. However, this does not mean that Lily will find what she originally set out to gain. I argue that “The House of Mirth” exemplifies clear social standards that effectively lead to the demise and unhappiness of women throughout this time period.

Throughout the novel, Wharton makes it very obvious that Lily is on a mission to find a wealthy husband. In fact, finding a husband is essentially her job. This point is proven when Selden says, “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re all brought up for?” (12). As a reader, it is frustrating to envision Lily and all the possibilities set in front of her as she pushes them all away. From the beginning, it is evident that Lily and Selden have feelings for each other. Although she is on a quest for a husband, she never thinks it possible for her to marry without a great deal of money being attached to the marriage. Moreover, this is the case with Selden. Lily quickly jumps on the opportunity to court Percy Gryce, a wealthy and available bachelor, even though she knows he is boring and requires her “last resource” conversation topics (23). Due to her luxurious style of living, Lily runs into a great deal of debt. She then turns to Gus Trenor, a married man, to invest some money in the stock market. To Lily’s surprise, Mr. Trenor expects something in return for the deeds he has done for her. While Lily does not want anything to do with Mr. Trenor, she soon realizes the consequences of her actions. In an attempt to pay off her debt and remain in the social class she desires, she only creates more issues for herself that will eventually lead to her overall demise.

Furthermore, other women throughout “The House of Mirth” experience unhappiness all at the expense of saving their place on the social ladder. Judy Trenor, wife of Gus Trenor, pays very little attention to her husband. She is married to him purely for the status and wealth. While Lily is not the only character within this novel struggling with the battle between happiness and status, it is evident that Lily has the deepest struggle. Although her mindset is understandable when referencing the times and her upbringing, it is still hard for the reader to fully grasp her intentions and choices. While Lily spends all her time in search for a marriage that will save her status and lifestyle, it is clear that her search will only lead to more unhappiness and instability.